

CONNECT

Get ON The Fence!

2395 IA

Isn't it time we rediscovered the lost art of agreeing to disagree?

- 1 It wasn't long ago that I was telling anyone who would listen [and many who would not] to *get off the fence*. The fence has gone, I kept saying – it's long since collapsed - under the weight of so many people who sat on it.

But that was then – and now, I'm saying the exact opposite. There is a time for everything - and this is the time to get *ON the fence*! That's my opinion, which I'll hold until I change my mind.

But what does being *on the fence* mean and why do I believe – that is, until I believe something different – that being *on the fence* is a good thing?



- 2 According to The Free Dictionary, [on the fence](#) means “not making a decision or taking a side” when presented with two possibilities. It means, in other words, undecided, uncommitted or neutral.

Other definitions of “on the fence,” these being from Merriam-Webster's thesaurus [Synonyms and Antonyms of on the fence](#) are “not feeling sure about the truth, wisdom, or trustworthiness of someone or something.” Other words for *on the fence* suggested by Merriam-Webster include doubtful, dubious, sceptical, suspicious, uncertain, unconvinced, undecided, unsettled and unsure. People with their heads in the clouds might sit here.

On the fence is the opposite, according to Merriam-Webster, of being certain, convinced, positive or sure, while their suggested near-antonyms – words or phrases meaning almost the opposite - of *on the fence* include biased and prejudiced.

Put like that, doesn't being *on the fence* sound more appealing? But it's up to you to decide whether it does or not. I'm on the fence about it myself!

- 3 Why do I think it will be good if more people get *on the fence*? It's because society appears to be becoming almost more divided by the day. People's opinions on topics appear to be incredibly important to them – more important than harmony between people. To be clear, I'm not advocating for polite small talk about things that don't matter – perish the thought! I don't like pretence. I don't really do small talk, either – although I'm a little better than I used to be. The truth is that I don't usually *wish* to engage in small talk.

The harmony between people I refer to, includes conversation and discussion. It includes tolerance for one another's views and opinions. After all – to run the rule of absurdity over the thing – what's the point of having a conversation with someone who agrees with us about everything? Is that even a conversation – or is it more like a mirror that talks back to us?

Didn't people, at one time, discuss things? And not so long ago, either. Is it just me, or is there a lot of defending of opinions going on these days? It seems that way, particularly on social media, but isn't it also the case in “real life?”

One question is, why do opinions *need* to be defended? Another question is, why do so many people apparently feel the need to attack other people's opinions?

What's going on, I wonder? Why would hearing a view that differs from one's own view, cause anyone to feel threatened – assuming that is what's happening?

It has to be said, some views are being expressed at the present time – mainly online but also offline – which are triggering people. While I'm not trying to play down any of the risks and potential dangers that face vulnerable members of society, including children – we certainly all need to be aware of these – it does seem that people are often triggered by any encounter with a different opinion from their own about almost *anything*.

- 4 The journalist **Peter Hitchens** recently made some excellent points about the benefits of people holding – and sharing with one another – different opinions.

In an interview with PoliticsJOE, Hitchens expressed concern about the restrictions being imposed in the UK by the authorities on people's freedom of speech. The interview, titled [Peter Hitchens interview: Free speech is vital, release the republicans and replace the police](#) is fascinating and well worth watching. Hitchens made some interesting criticisms of what is being taught in schools – and the state of the British police. He believes completely in policing – but believes that the current police system has failed – it needs to be replaced, rather than overhauled. As an example of why he holds this view about the police, he explained that in Westminster recently a gentleman had been accosted by a policeman – *for holding a blank piece of*

paper - in case he might offend someone with what he might write on that piece of paper.

On the subject of free speech, Hitchens said in the interview that it is extraordinary how often, when he says something - instead of saying "*I disagree with you*", people say: "*You shouldn't have been allowed to say that.*"

Hitchens makes the excellent point that, even if the person who holds a different opinion from you is wrong, you will be able to strengthen your own argument by confronting theirs. If your opponent is right, society needs to hear from him. Conversely, if you're right, then by combatting your opponent's opinion in civil discussion, you will be able to show that you're right - to your opponent's satisfaction and yours. You'll also be able to make your own arguments better - and your opponent will have learned something vital.

Hitchens referred to some essential principles set out by the 19th century political philosopher **John Stuart Mill**, which have stood the test of time, are well-known and, nominally at least, widely accepted - yet remain overlooked. This is despite their enduring - and indeed increasing - significance for modern man.

Mill's principles are described by **Andrew Lynn**, the author of the "Classics for the Modern Man" series which draws upon classic texts and traditional wisdom to help us answer profound questions. In [John Stuart Mill's defence of freedom of speech](#), Lynn explains that Mill believed that freedom was founded on freedom of thought and freedom of speech. Mill believed that people should be free not only to think and speak as they please, but also to act as they please, on condition that they caused no harm to others. Mill did not believe in censorship of opinion because silencing an opinion assumes the silencer's infallibility - they know without any doubt that the opinion is a false one. If the opinion is partly wrong and partly correct, the full truth can only become known by allowing the opinion to be expressed. If the opinion is entirely false, censorship was not justified for Mill. He argued that true beliefs only become *more than mere convention and prejudice* when they have been *vigorously and earnestly contested*.

Hitchens also said in the interview that the UK's education system has completely failed to educate people in many important aspects of what a civilised society consists of - including tolerance of dissent. Part of the price of living in a free society is the need to listen to your opponents and being prepared to tolerate people saying things you don't like.

This interview with Peter Hitchens was described in a written article by VOX Political, titled [It is not the function of the police to patrol our minds - Peter Hitchens on free speech](#). This article - on a "left-wing" platform - acknowledged that one of the many divides in society - in this case, politically left and right - is a false division [*aren't they all?*]

The point was made that Hitchens is "right-wing" but opposes the "right-wing" behaviour of police of arresting people who were merely exercising

their right to free speech - in this case, by calling for the end of the monarchy. The article also remarked on Hitchens' comments about attempts to reverse the relationship between the state and the individual and the cancellation of free speech.

- 5 Having no opinion on anything would be impossible – and frankly, life would be incredibly boring for us all. I'm not seriously suggesting we don't HAVE an opinion – just that we remember it IS just our opinion.

Also, we KNOW what our own opinion is. We don't know what someone else's opinion is, however. By listening, we'll probably learn something valuable. We might change our minds – a little or a lot. We might see the subject from a different point of view. Most of all, however, by being a little more *on the fence*, we're far more likely to hear something interesting from other people. Because, once someone's told you in no uncertain terms what THEY think about something – as in, THIS IS HOW IT IS – and we've all been there – the desire to tell them what YOU think may well have evaporated because you know they won't be listening to what you say. Instead, they'll be assembling their argument to prove you wrong and prove them right. That's not fun – that's not intelligent - and it's not conversation.

*When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know.
But if you listen, you may learn something new.*

A wise quote indeed by the [Dalai Lama](#).

How about having a *strong opinion, weakly held*? This concept was created by a university professor called **Paul Saffo**, who suggests that having a *strong opinion, weakly held* allows your mind room to change.

Tim Denning thinks it's great to change your mind - and he tells us why in an article on Medium called [Changing Your Mind When Presented with New Information Is a Sign of Intelligence](#). Denning explains in this article, Paul Saffo's *strong opinion, weakly held* idea, which might just be the closest most of us can get to being *on the fence*.

Denning says that he has changed his mind a lot over the last few years. He thinks it's great – but he says that it upsets other people, because they expect him to hold the same opinions for a long time.

In contrast, he refers to people who obsessively defend their current opinions on social media as if their lives depend on it as “human tragedies.” I'm sure we've all encountered them – and in real life, as well.

Being on the fence means being open-minded. It means being able to receive new ideas, opinions and information. And if we want to change our minds – they're ours to change, aren't they?

By the way, it's been said that the ability for a person to change their mind in the face of new evidence is the no1 sign of intelligence.

I heard that quote many years ago, but I only found out today, from Tim Denning's article, that it's credited to someone who's a bit like Marmite.

You either love him or hate him.
That *someone* is Amazon's founder, **Jeff Bezos**.

Does that devalue the truth of the quote?
Why would it? Whoever said it, it's a great saying – a true opinion.
I'm *off the fence* about that.

CONNECT'S Maxim and Oath

Connect is only interested in finding and sharing the TRUTH.
In search of that TRUTH, we only pose questions – we have no answers.

By: Helen King

Contact/Source: CONNECT: [Magazine](#)

- 2 [LINK](#) The Free Dictionary: On The Fence - meaning
- 2 [LINK](#) Merriam Webster: Synonyms and Antonyms of *on the fence*
- 4 [LINK](#) YouTube: PoliticsJOE: Peter Hitchens interview: Free speech is vital, release the republicans and replace the police
- 4 [LINK](#) Andrew Lynn: John Stuart Mill's defence of freedom of speech
- 4 [LINK](#) VOX Political: 'It is not the function of the police to patrol our minds' – Peter Hitchens on free speech
- 5 [LINK](#) Quotespedia: quote by Dalai Lama
- 5 [LINK](#) Medium: Tim Denning: Changing Your Mind When Presented with New Information Is a Sign of Intelligence

Cats sit on the fence - wisely taking in what goes on around them.

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